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ABSTRACT

In recent years researchers have developed strategies to understand or promote ethnic identity in African-American youth. This paper discusses six studies or interventions which explored ethnic identity among African-American youth. These interventions were designed to produce positive changes in areas such as ethnic identity, academic achievement, life skills and social competencies, cultural awareness, career exploration and social bonding. Participants ranged in age from 9 to 16 years of age, and came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels. The information on the interventions was based on self reports, archival data, participant observations, ethnographic techniques, and focus groups and are presented under five major headings: (1) operationalizing ethnic identity; (2) community representativeness; (3) difficult to reach; (4) engaging youth participants; and (5) researcher/community collaboration. While the efforts examined in this report provide valuable information, most interventions do not furnish the information needed to determine whether and how programs are producing the desired developmental changes. Likewise, while researchers know which activities promote ethnic identity development, scant intervention data exists to verify this belief. To answer these questions, researchers must undertake longitudinal and experimental research that examines a variety of psychosocial constructs. (RJM)

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Research and Intervention Issues in the Examination of Ethnic Identity in African-American Youth[1]

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Running Head: Ethnic Identity Intervention Issues

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Research and Intervention Issues in the Examination of Ethnic Identity in African-American Youth

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In recent years a substantial number of research and intervention strategies have been proposed and implemented in an effort to further understand or promote ethnic identity in African-American youth (Brookins, 1992; Coppock & Coppock, 1992; Hare & Hare, 1985; Marshall, 1993; Oliver, 1989; Smith & Brookins, 1993). The success of these efforts obviously depend on their adherence to sound conceptual and developmental principles (Brookins, 1992; Oliver, 1989; Spencer, 1985), the apprcpriateness of the research design, and the effectiveness of the implementation strategy (Smith, 1991). Moreover, given the variability with which the ethnic identity construct is used, "poor" research and program implementation puts researchers and communities in the position of being undergirded by inconsistent, incomplete, and potentially damaging models (Akbar, 1991).

This paper will report on a variety of findings from six studies that were at least partially designed to assess ethnic identity in African-American youth. As indicated in Table 1, each study involved an evaluation of an intervention targeting African-American youth. Each of the interventions had quite different venues ranging from Detroit, Michigan to Durham, North Carolina. The interventions were designed to produce positive changes in a variety of areas including: ethnic identity, academic achievement, achievement motivation, life-skills (i.e., sexuality, AIDS/STD prevention, conflict resolution, etc.) and social

competencies, cultural awareness, career exploration, and social bonding (i.e., mentoring). The participants in these interventions were an aggregate mix of males and females between 9 and 16 years of age and came from families of a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels. The information reported in this paper is based on the quantitative (self-report and archival data) and qualitative (participant observation, ethnographic techniques, and focus groups) assessment of the implementation and evaluation of the interventions.

Insert Table 1 about here

Operationalizing Ethnic Identity

The attempt to operationalize ethnic identity for youth populations is a relatively recent phenomena (Phinney, 1992; Smith & Brookins, 1993). Nevertheless, over the years studies have been conducted that attempt to examine correlates and predictors of the construct or, attempt to promote it through a variety of intervention strategies. An examination of these efforts reveal that while most provide a valid assessment of the ethnic identity construct, there is a considerable amount of inconsistency across studies.

All but one (SAGE) of the studies identified above attempted to assess components of the ethnic identity through the "Multi-construct African Identity Questionnaire" (MCAIQ), a recently developed instrument that measures several proposed

components of the ethnic identity construct (Smith & Brookins, 1993) including ethnic preference, ethnic attitudes, and ethnic group cooperation. The studies also served as an opportunity for further development and refinement of the instrument.

The findings, at least partially presented in the Smith (1994) paper presented during this symposium, have pointed to a much broader (or at least further) conceptualization of the ethnic identity construct than previously identified. In general, using the Cross "two-factor theory of Black Identity" as the framework, ethnic identity is seen as one identity domain[2] within an individual's "Reference Group Orientation" that is composed of at least four (4) separate components (i.e., ethnic attitudes, preferences, awareness, and behavior) that develop over time. Proper nurturance of these components would lead to psychological health in this domain (Figure 1). For instance, from a program development point-of-view, knowledge of ones ethnic history and culture is seen as essential to increasing ethnic awareness but must be supplemented with particular "psychological resistance strategies" that teaches the individual how to cope with and transcend both historic and contemporary realities. More specifically, in addition to promoting group pride and respect, knowledge of ancient African history and culture must clearly emphasize the value system that formed the bases for the life of African peoples and how that worldview can be useful in coping with contemporary experiences. Through focus groups, observations, and implementation experiences it became clear that

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[2] The other identity domains including gender, religious, occupational, etc.

program implementers must become much more effective at linking program activities to this broader conceptualization of ethnic identity processes.

Finally, despite the fact that a theoretically and conceptually reliable definition of ethnic identity development for African-American youth has yet to be fully articulated, the "necessary" proliferation of programs designed to produce "identity" changes in youth continues. The experiences of program operators and participants can provide valuable insight into the most effective strategies to promote change. In addition, more widespread dissemination of the guidelines provided by existing "non-empirical" models is necessary to inform both researchers and program administrators in these areas.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Community Representativeness

Community workers and researchers are well aware of the inherent obstacles to reliable community-based programming and research. In at least 4 of the 6 studies identified above special efforts were made to include participants that represented a broad cross-section of the participating African-American community in terms of socioeconomic standing and geographic diversity. Nevertheless, the program staff and researchers encountered several issues that worked to compromise the effectiveness of the interventions and/or limit the generalizability of the findings.

The two that will be discussed here include accessing difficult-to-reach populations and engaging unmotivated, reluctant, and/or limited ability participants.

Difficult-to-reach populations are perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome in community-based research. Academically and culturally based programs generally do not have a difficult time attracting participants, however, youth in these groups were often from highly motivated families with a strong degree of parental involvement. While this in no way detracts from the need for the program amongst these participants it has the potential to (and often does) drain away resources from more needy youth and families.

In addition, research findings are often skewed by this "motivation" factor that may limit our understanding of the constructs in question (i.e., ethnic identity) and the "true" impact that the program may have on a much broader sample of participants. For instance, focus groups conducted with youth from two of the programs listed above revealed a ratio of at least 3-to-1 of youth who were not participating compared to those who were. That is, each of the focus group participants could identify at least 3 other youth who were not participating but for whom they felt the program would be beneficial. In other cases, intensive outreach efforts (i.e., school recruitment, door-to-door solicitation, etc.) by program staff often resulted in a ratio of no better than 5-to-1 on the side of unsuccessful recruitments.

Fortunately, some success has been realized by providing attractive and continuous incentives for program participation such as basketball leagues, movie tickets, and T-shirts or caps.

While these are seemingly simple, albeit resource dependent, efforts that recreation centers and other community agencies have been practicing for quite some time, the degree to which they tap into difficult-to-reach populations is unproven given the lack of available research specific to these points. It is clear that intervention research that includes "all" sectors of the African-American community is necessary in order to obtain a more thorough understanding of the ethnic identity construct and to insure the effectiveness of such interventions.

Engaging Youth Participants

Making the transition from getting young people in the door to engaging them in program activities continues to be a daunting task for community-based programs. Illiteracy is one of the greatest problems faced by programs for "at-risk" adolescents. Unfortunately, many program activities tend to be "academically" based in that they require participants to read and write at least at their own grade level. Youth have been seen to become intimidated by such requirements.

Another problem has to do with the degree to which program activities can hold the interest of the adolescent. Fortunately, it has been the experience of most of the identified programs that youth are motivated by information they find relevant to their own lives and experiences. Programs must specifically make the efforts to identify what these concerns are through constant and open dialogue with the participants. Programs must also strive to be flexible enough to accommodate these needs without sacrificing their underlying intent or integrity.

Mentoring relationships are a prime example of the need for flexibility as well as commitment. Many "at-risk" youth require attention that is often not part of the specified "goals" of the program (i.e., tutoring, counseling, supervision, etc.). These needs can strain even the most committed brothers and sisters. It is not clear that we have a good understanding of how to maintain effective involvement with youth outside of intensive one-on-one efforts.

Concrete benefits such as employment skills and jobs also provide incentives for engaging youth. Employment was seen as the major motivational factor for participants in the SAGE program identified in Table 1. The youth in this program wanted to work and expressed their belief that a lack of available jobs was a major factor contributing to the problems in their community. Fortunately or unfortunately incentives are dependent on community resources and structure. Therefore, researchers and programs operators cannot ignore the degree to which youth specific programs are integrated into broader community needs.

Researcher/Community Collaboration

Intervention research requires a close collaboration between researchers and community programs. Unfortunately, because African-American communities have often been exploited by social scientists a variety of issues ranging from distrust to hostility often arise to complicate these relationships. Problems often arise from the lack of familiarity or respect that researchers have toward the integrity of the community. Even the best, and supposedly ethical, intentions of the researcher (Black or White) are often not necessarily based on the actual wishes of the

targeted community. As it should be, the community researcher must "pay his/her dues" within the community by committing their personal and professional resources to the needs of the community, spending time and coming to understand the community, and providing opportunities for community members and organizations to contribute to the formulation of the research project. Again, fairly simple and not unprecedented information that, based on the experiences with some of the programs identified above as well as others, is not adhered to as often as it should be.

Other collaboration problems arise from a lack of understanding and reliability on the part of community members in the ability of research to provide concrete benefits to existing and proposed interventions. Community programs are often primarily concerned with program implementation and reaching the greatest number of participants, even with the risks associated with an unproven model. As a result community researchers must develop a nurturing attitude toward intervention work and gradually move programs toward a greater understanding and acceptance of the research paradigm. This often dictates less rigorous research designs at the initial stages of a project with gradual movement toward more rigorous and experimental studies. Funding agencies and universities must also recognize and support these efforts through longer term grants, community outreach efforts, and innovative opportunities for community workers to take advantage of university and professional resources.

Summary

Each of three areas identified above requires an honest assessment of the role that research can play in developing and institutionalizing community-based programs for African-American youth. To date, most research efforts are, at best, limited to quasi-experimental designs and measuring somewhat trivial outcomes (i.e., knowledge gain). Other evaluations are conducted for strictly "basic" research purposes in order to document the "status" of African-American youth in areas such as sexual and violent behavior, contraceptive use, etc.). While these efforts certainly provide valuable information they fall far short of providing the information needed to determine *whether and how* programs are producing the desired developmental changes.

For instance, we believe we know what activities are necessary to promote ethnic identity development, however, very little intervention data exists to verify this belief. Moreover, our knowledge on the "community" impact of these interventions is also scarce. Focus group findings suggest most participants believe that interventions will have a "ripple" or cumulative effect on at least the individual level. That is, each youth will pass on the knowledge they receive to their peers. Again, while important, the impact on needed changes in the structure of the community is rarely addressed.

Much more longitudinal and experimental research needs to be conducted to adequately address these questions. Two promising efforts are underway with the SAGE and KEYS projects mentioned above. Both these studies involve experimental designs that

examine a variety of psychosocial constructs as well as program implementation issues like the ones mentioned above.

All of this points to the fact that we have a lot of challenges ahead as researchers, practitioners, and community activists to insure that we are sophisticated enough to adequately and honestly meet the comprehensive developmental needs of African-American youth.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Identified Interventions Targeting African-American Youth

Program Name	Location	Participant Character-istics	Primary Programmatic Goals
1. My Brother's Keeper	Detroit, Michigan	100, 11-12 year old Males & Females.	Academic achievement, cultural awareness, ethnic identity development, mentoring.
2. Career Exploration Program	Flint, Michigan	100 11-13 year old, Multiracial, Males & Females.	Career exploration, academic achievement, cultural awareness, ethnic identity development.
3. Pre-College Program	Raleigh, North Carolina	180 Males & Females; 12 - 18 years of age.	Academic achievement, cultural awareness.
4. Brothers-to-Brother	Wake County, North Carolina	80 Males; 9-14 years of age.	Adolescent male pregnancy prevention, cultural awareness.
5. Supporting Adolescents through Guidance and Employment (SAGE)	Durham, North Carolina	40 Males; 11-15 years of age.	Rites-of-Passage, entrepreneurial training, job training, mentoring, ethnic identity development.
6. Kemetic Education for Young Scholars	Wake County, North Carolina	80 Males & Females; 11-14 years of age.	Rites-of-Passage, mentoring, Achievement motivation, ethnic identity development.

Figure 1: Schematic Modification of the Cross (1991) Two-Factor Theory of Black Identity Related to Reference Group Orientation.